

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
DISTRICT OF SOUTH CAROLINA

Don Aubrey Brooks, # 276275
aka Don A Brooks

Plaintiff,

vs.

Woodland Designs;
Vaugh Keweon;
Hinkle Excavations, and
Laramie Hinkle,

Defendants.

) C/A No. 8:09-2250-HFF-BHH

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Report and Recommendation

This is a civil action filed *pro se* by a state prison inmate.¹ Plaintiff is currently incarcerated at the Walden Correctional Institution, part of the South Carolina Department of Corrections prison system. In the Complaint filed in this case, Plaintiff seeks to recover compensatory damages, including medical benefits, from former employers for work-related injuries that allegedly preceded his incarceration. According to the Complaint and the service documents submitted in this case, Plaintiff and all Defendants are citizens/residents of the state of South Carolina.

Under established local procedure in this judicial district, a careful review has been made of Plaintiff's *pro se* Complaint filed in this case. This review has been conducted pursuant to the procedural provisions of 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915, 1915A, and the Prison Litigation Reform Act of 1996, and in light of the following precedents: *Denton v. Hernandez*, 504 U.S. 25 (1992); *Neitzke v. Williams*, 490 U.S. 319, 324-25 (1989); *Haines v. Kerner*, 404 U.S. 519 (1972); *Nasim v. Warden, Md. House of Corr.*, 64 F.3d 951 (4th Cir. 1995)(*en banc*); *Todd v. Baskerville*, 712 F.2d 70 (4th Cir. 1983); *Boyce v. Alizaduh*, 595 F.2d 948 (4th Cir. 1979).

¹ Pursuant to 28 U.S.C. §636(b)(1), and D.S.C. Civ. R. 73.02(B)(2)(e), this magistrate judge is authorized to review all pretrial matters in such *pro se* cases and to submit findings and recommendations to the District Court. See 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e); 1915A (as soon as possible after docketing, district courts should review prisoner cases to determine whether they are subject to summary dismissal).

Pro se complaints are held to a less stringent standard than those drafted by attorneys, *Gordon v. Leeke*, 574 F.2d 1147, 1151 (4th Cir. 1978), and a federal district court is charged with liberally construing a complaint filed by a *pro se* litigant to allow the development of a potentially meritorious case. *Erickson v. Pardus*, 551 U.S. 89 (2007); *Hughes v. Rowe*, 449 U.S. 5, 9-10 (1980); *Cruz v. Beto*, 405 U.S. 319 (1972). When a federal court is evaluating a *pro se* complaint, the plaintiff's allegations are assumed to be true. *Fine v. City of N. Y.*, 529 F.2d 70, 74 (2d Cir. 1975). Nevertheless, the requirement of liberal construction does not mean that this Court can ignore a clear failure in the pleading to allege facts which set forth a claim currently cognizable in a federal district court. *Weller v. Dep't of Social Servs.*, 901 F.2d 387 (4th Cir. 1990). Even under this less stringent standard, however, the Complaint filed in this case is subject to summary dismissal under the provisions of 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B) due to the lack of subject matter jurisdiction over Plaintiff's claims.

In order for this Court to hear and decide a case, the Court must, first, have jurisdiction over the subject matter of the litigation. It is well settled that federal courts are courts of limited jurisdiction. They possess only that power authorized by Constitution and statute, *Willy v. Coastal Corp.*, 503 U.S. 131, 136-37 (1992); *Bender v. Williamsport Area School Dist.*, 475 U.S. 534, 541 (1986), which is not to be expanded by judicial decree, *American Fire & Casualty Co. v. Finn*, 341 U.S. 6 (1951). It is to be presumed that a cause lies outside this limited jurisdiction, *Turner v. Bank of N. Am.*, 4 U.S. (4 Dall.) 8, 11 (1799), and the burden of establishing the contrary rests upon the party asserting jurisdiction, *McNutt v. Gen. Motors Acceptance Corp.*, 298 U.S. 178, 182-83 (1936). The two most commonly recognized and utilized bases for federal court jurisdiction are (1) "federal question," 28 U.S.C. § 1331, and (2) "diversity of citizenship." 28 U.S.C. § 1332. The allegations contained in the Complaint filed by Plaintiff in this case do not fall within the scope of either form of this Court's limited jurisdiction, and there is no other possible basis for federal jurisdiction evident from the face of the pleading.

First, there is no basis for a finding of diversity jurisdiction over this Complaint. The diversity

statute, 28 U.S.C. § 1332(a), requires complete diversity of parties and an amount in controversy in excess of seventy-five thousand dollars (\$75,000.00):

(a) The district courts shall have original jurisdiction of all civil actions where the matter in controversy exceeds the sum or value of \$75,000, exclusive of interest and costs, and is between—

(1) citizens of different States[.]

28 U.S.C. § 1332 (emphasis added). Complete diversity of parties in a case means that no party on one side may be a citizen of the same state as any party on the other side. *Owen Equip. & Erection Co. v. Kroger*, 437 U.S. 365, 372-74 & nn. 13-16 (1978). This Court has no diversity jurisdiction under 28 U.S.C. § 1332 over this case because, as previously stated, according to the information provided by Plaintiff when he filed his Complaint, Plaintiff and all Defendants are residents of South Carolina.² Although it is not clear whether Plaintiff's allegations would be sufficient to support a finding that the \$75,000 jurisdictional amount would be in controversy in this case, this does not matter in this case because, in absence of diversity of citizenship, the amount in controversy is irrelevant.

Second, the essential allegations contained in the Complaint are insufficient to show that the case is one "arising under the Constitution, laws, or treaties of the United States." 28 U.S.C. § 1331. That is, the Complaint does not state a claim cognizable under this Court's "federal question" jurisdiction. Plaintiff's Complaint raises a routine work-related personal injury claim. Generally, such tort claims are a matter of state law to be heard in the state courts and/or in state workers' compensation proceedings, unless diversity of citizenship is present. See, e.g., *Mungo v. Rental Uniform Serv. Of Florence, Inc.*, 678 S.E. 2d 825 (S.C. Ct. App. 2009) (workers' compensation); *Posey v. Proper Mold & Engineering, Inc.*, 661 S.E. 2d 395 (S.C. Ct. App. 2008)(work-related tort claim).

Plaintiff's allegations do not contain any reference to alleged violation of any federal statute

² Even though two Defendants appear to be corporate or business entities and not human beings, they are still "residents" of South Carolina as that term is legally understood. See *Huggins v. Winn-Dixie Greenville, Inc.*, 233 F.Supp. 667 , 669 (D. S.C. 1964).

or constitutional provision by Defendants, nor is any type of federal question jurisdiction otherwise evident from the face of the Complaint. Even if Plaintiff had made assertions that his federal rights were violated by Defendants, this Court would not be bound by such allegations and would be entitled to disregard them if the facts did not support Plaintiff's contentions. When considering the issue of whether a case is one "arising under the Constitution . . ." or, in other words, whether "federal question" jurisdiction is present, a federal court is not bound by the parties' characterization of a case. District courts are authorized to disregard such characterizations to avoid "unjust manipulation or avoidance of its jurisdiction." *Lyon v. Centimark Corp.*, 805 F. Supp. 333, 334-35 (E.D. N.C. 1992); see *Louisville & Nashville R.R. v. Mottley*, 211 U.S. 149 (1908); cf. *Gully v. First Nat'l Bank in Meridian*, 299 U.S. 109 (1936) ("Not every question of federal law emerging in a suit is proof that a federal law is the basis of the suit."); *Bonner v. Circuit Ct. of St. Louis*, 526 F.2d 1331, 1336 (8th Cir. 1975) (federal constitutional claims are cognizable in both state courts and in federal courts: "Congress and the federal courts have consistently recognized that federal courts should permit state courts to try state cases, and that, where constitutional issues arise, state court judges are fully competent to handle them subject to Supreme Court review."). Additionally, purely private conduct such as that alleged in this case, no matter how wrongful, injurious, fraudulent, or discriminatory, is not actionable under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 or under the Fourteenth Amendment, the two most common provisions under which persons come into federal court to claim that others have violated their constitutional rights. See *Lugar v. Edmondson Oil Co.*, 457 U.S. 922, 936 (1982); *Burton v. Wilmington Parking Auth.*, 365 U.S. 715, 721 (1961).

In the absence of either diversity or federal question jurisdiction over the parties' dispute, this case should be summarily dismissed without issuance of process for Defendants.

Recommendation

Accordingly, it is recommended that the District Court dismiss the Complaint in this case *without prejudice* and without issuance and service of process. See *Denton v. Hernandez*; *Neitzke*

v. Williams; Haines v. Kerner; Brown v. Briscoe, 998 F.2d 201, 202-04 (4th Cir. 1993); *Boyce v. Alizaduh; Todd v. Baskerville*, 712 F.2d at 74; see also 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B); 28 U.S.C. § 1915A (as soon as possible after docketing, district courts should review prisoner cases to determine whether they are subject to summary dismissal).

Plaintiff's attention is directed to the important notice on the next page.

s/Bruce Howe Hendricks
United States Magistrate Judge

September 3, 2009
Greenville, South Carolina

Notice of Right to File Objections to Report and Recommendation

The parties are advised that they may file specific written objections to this Report and Recommendation with the District Court Judge. Objections must specifically identify the portions of the Report and Recommendation to which objections are made and the basis for such objections. In the absence of a timely filed objection, a district court judge need not conduct a de novo review, but instead must “only satisfy itself that there is no clear error on the face of the record in order to accept the recommendation.” *Diamond v. Colonial Life & Acc. Ins. Co.*, 416 F.3d 310 (4th Cir. 2005).

Specific written objections must be filed within ten (10) days of the date of service of this Report and Recommendation. 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1); Fed. R. Civ. P. 72(b). The time calculation of this ten-day period excludes weekends and holidays and provides for an additional three (3) days for filing by mail. Fed. R. Civ. P. 6(a) & (e). Filing by mail pursuant to Fed. R. Civ. P. 5 may be accomplished by mailing objections to:

Larry W. Propes, Clerk
United States District Court
P.O. Box 10768
Greenville, South Carolina 29603

Failure to timely file specific written objections to this Report and Recommendation will result in waiver of the right to appeal from a judgment of the District Court based upon such Recommendation. 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1); *Thomas v. Arn*, 474 U.S. 140 (1985); *U. S. v. Schronce*, 727 F.2d 91 (4th Cir. 1984); *Wright v. Collins*, 766 F.2d 841 (4th Cir. 1985).